

Giving Voice to the Photographic Manufacturing Industry: Oral History in the Kodak Heritage Collection at Museums Victoria

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Like many museums, Museums Victoria has an active oral history program. In the Society and Technology Department there are a range of oral history collections, some still growing as active projects. They cut across the thematic curatorial areas of the department, touching on topics such as the history of the museum, women farmers (the [Invisible Farmer](#) project), the [Black Saturday](#) bushfires, war, migration, the Spotswood Pumping Station, domestic life and work in the home. One of the current active projects relates to the photographic manufacturing industry, in particular to Kodak Australasia. This project builds on the acquisition of an extensive and significant material culture collection known as the Kodak Heritage Collection, which was donated by Kodak to Museums Victoria in 2005.

In the last 15 years the Kodak Heritage Collection team at Museums Victoria has recorded 50 oral history interviews with former Kodak Australasia staff. The oral histories are all in wav and mp3 formats and are all fully transcribed. The result of this work is a rich assemblage of recollections from a variety of Kodak staff across the twentieth century, which co-exist in the Museums Victoria's state collection alongside material culture from the interviewees and the broader Kodak Australasia corporate collection.

This oral history work aimed to preserve the precious memories and knowledge of the Kodak worker community, because their specialist expertise was critical to understanding the complex technological and social history embedded in the Kodak Australasia collection held at Museums Victoria. There was an urgency around this work due to the ageing population of the Kodak community, and a relatively narrow window of opportunity existed to document their knowledge before their stories were lost.

The majority of the interviews were conducted by project oral historian Lesley Alves and Museums Victoria staff member and long-time Kodak Heritage Collection curator Fiona Kinsey. Selected interviews were recorded by Hannah Perkins and Georgia Knight from the Kodak curatorial team.

We used a whole of life methodology, along with highly focused questions on working life at Kodak.



Lucy Mikedis and her husband Michael Mikedis on the day of their interview with Lesley Alves, 14 November 2013, for the Kodak Oral History Project. Copyright Museums Victoria.

In terms of Kodak history, we asked our interviewees about a range of key company operations and events, to gain knowledge about the daily routine and the specific job of the person, but also to understand the larger role of the company and its shifts over time, and how this impacted staff. Within this approach, we particularly sought to evoke the sounds, smells and spatial character of the Kodak factory and offices. While we have literally tens of thousands of images of Kodak in the museum's collection, we wanted to build a more sensory understanding of life at the company.

The interviewees are mostly former Kodak staff – representing a wide variety of roles in the company, from managing directors to workers on the production line, in the research laboratories, in the offices and on the serving counters of the factory canteen. Their working lives stretch from the 1930s to the early twenty-first century, and each interviewee typically had decades of experience with the company to draw on – in the twentieth century Kodak was for many people their life-long employer.

We also interviewed a number of non-staff with key links to Kodak's history in Australia, such as descendants of one of the men whose photographic business merged with Kodak to establish Kodak Australasia in 1908, members of the family that sold land to Kodak for its



Jim Healy on the day of his interview with Lesley Alves, 12 March 2014 for the Kodak Oral History Project. Copyright Museums Victoria.

Coburg factory, a man who lived as a boy onsite at the Abbotsford factory with his Kodak employee parents, and experts in health imaging from the medical and academic professions.

Having built a network of over 100 former Kodak staff interested in contributing to our project through print media, radio and word of mouth, our team additionally conducted informal interviews with dozens of other former Kodak staff. We also worked with former staff to undertake detailed documentation of collection objects in our database, at times bringing past Kodak work groups back together such as members of the Engineering Department, and drawing on their expertise to add descriptions, dates and technical information, and double check the accuracy of our documentation.

As well as providing their oral histories, many interviewees generously donated objects, images and documents to the Kodak collection. Their material culture enriched the collection, because it typically filled key information gaps in the corporate collection or gave character, context and human scale to existing narratives in the corporate archive, spotlighting the margins and minutiae of daily working life at Kodak. Their oral accounts in turn gave added context and significance to the tangible material. In contributing to the project, the interviewees affirmed their long lives at work and staked a claim in the historical record, in the process actively shaping the documented narrative of Kodak's history.

One of the aims of this project has been to include participants who represent diverse voices and alternative perspectives. While we have a variety of voices already in the collection, we would like to stretch representation further, with more women's voices, more stories from migrant perspectives, and stories that record indigenous participation in the workforce. Our project is still underway, and we aim

to identify further interviewees as we continue to work with the community.

As with most oral history endeavours, this project evoked a range of emotions from the interviewees – mostly joy and pride in their careers and relationships at work, which was not surprising considering that the interviewees self-enrolled to the project and wanted to celebrate their long and loyal working lives. But there was also sadness and grief – in memory of colleagues who had died, but also overwhelmingly in response to the closure of the Kodak factory in Coburg in 2004 which left a huge impact on many former staff, even those long retired at the time of its closure.

The interviews in this project have given voice to the photographic manufacturing industry in Australia through its most significant manufacturer, Kodak, but they also expand our understandings of many other topics of historical interest including, for example, the histories of Melbourne, migration, gender roles, labour relations, war, environmentalism and advertising.

The Kodak interviews are significant and fascinating – and we recorded them just in time, because a number of our older interviewees have now sadly passed away or no longer have the capacity to contribute. For an industry whose operations and technologies are now largely obsolete, this last generation of workers have held unique knowledge and my team and I feel privileged to have documented their stories.

Being housed at a public museum, this collection is preserved into the future, is accessible for research (currently by request but excerpts from the interviews will be available on our Collections Online website in the near future), and provides original source material for exhibition and education programs. However, another key legacy of our oral history practice in this project – and one that I am particularly proud of – is that, having facilitated a strong level of engagement with the broad Kodak 'family' over an extended period of time, we have built a warm and heartfelt connection with our oral history contributors, which is still ongoing.

For further information see:

Fiona Kinsey and Liza Dale-Hallett, 'Material Culture and Memories: Industrial Heritage Volunteer Projects', in Hamish Robertson (ed), *The Caring Museum: New Models of Engagement with Ageing*, Museums Etc, Cambridge, 2015.

See also:

<https://museums victoria.com.au/article/audio-visual-material-in-the-kodak-heritage-collection-at-museums-victoria/>